

Prickly pear apples, the fruit of the dominating cactus of the shortgrass country, hit worse last fall than since the days of the dreadful scieworm scourges. Calves and weaned lambs feasted on the thorny buds and apples; old cows and mother ewes devoured stickery pear pads. Our mutton lambs lost 10 precious pounds per head, piling around the cactus plants, all but ignoring rich molasses blocks surrounding the watering places.

Such a severe addiction, they had to be driven to water every morning. The more of the thorny fruit they ate, the more filled their lips became in stickers, and the harder it became to graze or lick the blocks. In all these years of trailing woolies over bitterweed and snake weed ranges, I had never seen such a thorough disintegration in such a short amount of time.

Four or five mornings a week, I saddled up to go face the wreck. Always before, the sheep cleaned up the apples, then extra feed and perhaps a sprinkling of mesquite or catclaw beans brought a turnaround. But this time, they kept finding a fresh supply until winter was too close to delay shipment.

The gloomiest morning of all this sadness was the morning the saddle horses came into feed painted up in burgundy-colored pear apple juice, like a tribe of New Guinea savages. To further dismay, 100 paces from the horse corral, the weaned calves showed the same symptoms, except

the stains on a black heifer's face were less dramatic than the ones around the mouth of a light colored horse's muzzle.

After bridling my horse, being careful to avoid the thorns, I threw my saddle and blanket on at the same time without so much as brushing off his back. No use worrying about a pear-eating horse having a sore back. Might have been the first time in 40 years I was too distracted to use a curry comb and brush.

"Damn half-witted, four-legged, john brown, pear-eating animals have been the downfall of the family for a hundred years. Gonna, by grabs, break me and ruin my health and sentence me to shame in the county poor farm," is the tone I hit.

I pulled up the cinch hard and fast. I had to loosen the girth to free the stirrup caught underneath the wraps. Going to turn a cow and calf to a trap, I bumped my head on a pipe lever passing by the squeeze chute. Once I regained my equilibrium, I dropped a glove after making four tries to catch a stirrup to make it on top of the saddle.

But like my old maternal grandfathers always said, "On the darkest night, son, you can see a few stars." A big change came over my horse after we struck the first bunch of lambs. Seemed like a different animal. He worked better and the lambs just strung out and drifted on to water without having to be forced by every patch of prickly pear. They nipped off apples as they passed by, yet they moved like sheep drifting into a fresh wind.

We finished at least an hour sooner than on any other morning. On the way to the house, I remembered an old friend of the Big Boss's, named Cotton Brooks, who claimed he had a horse who liked to go to water gaps. Cotton's horse, so he said, "Went right on off the muddy banks into the flood water and helped push the fence back straight."

Before I reached the house, I made the connection. I remembered how those Hankin Sorrel bloodlines of the Big Boss's from down south of Sonora broke out to be such good ponies to gather bitterweed sheep. Those colts hit the ground in a patch of bitterweed. Of course they had the breeding to move sick sheep. Without my knowing, the same thing happened to the pear-eating horses and the pear-eating lambs.

Once again the shortgrass country is going back to be a frontier. In November of 1986, the law against employing unpapered aliens also might as well have made grubbing prickly pear and cleaning out fencelines illegal, along with prohibiting taking mesquite stumps out of the gates and digging rock post holes. Later, Congress wiped out the wool and mohair incentive programs, ending all hope of hiring domestic labor. The final setting of the sun came about as jugkeepers this New Year stopped giving away calendars to any person vaguely connected to agriculture.

The feeder hasn't revealed what kind of ration he fed to take my lambs off prickly pear. He probably had to taper

them off on cotton burrs. If he finds a solution, maybe it can be added to our horse feed.